

James Madison to George Lee Turberville, November 2, 1788. Transcription: The Writings of James Madison, ed. Gaillard Hunt. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900-1910.

COPY IN SUBSTANCE OF A LETTER TO G. L. TURBERVILLE, ESQ. MAD. MSS.

N. York, Novr. 2, 1788.

Dear Sir,

Your favor of the 20th Ult. not having got into my hands in time to be acknowledged by the last mail, I have now the additional pleasure of acknowledging along with it your favor of the 24, which I recd yesterday.

You wish to know my sentiments on the project of another general Convention as suggested by New York. I shall give them to you with great frankness, though I am aware they may not coincide with those in fashion at Richmond or even with your own. I am not of the number if there be any such, who think the Constitution lately adopted a faultless work. On the contrary there are amendments wch I wished it to have received before it issued from the place in which it was formed. These amendments I still think ought to be made, according to the apparent sense of America and some of them at least, I presume

will be made. There are others concerning which doubts are entertained by many, and which have both advocates and opponents on each side of the main question. These I think ought to receive the light of actual experiment, before it would be prudent to admit them into the Constitution. With respect to the first class, the only question is which of the two modes provided be most eligible for the discussion and adoption of them. The

Library of Congress

objections agst. a Convention which give, a preference to the other mode in my judgment are the following 1. It will add to the difference among the States on the merits, another and an unnecessary difference concerning the mode. There are amendments which in themselves will probably be agreed to by all the States, and pretty certainly by the requisite proportion of them. If they be contended for in the mode of a Convention, there are unquestionably a number of States who will be so averse and apprehensive as to the mode, that they will reject the merits rather than agree to the mode. A Convention therefore does not appear to be the most convenient or probable Channel for getting to the object. 2. A Convention cannot be called without the unanimous consent of the parties who are to be bound by it, if first principles are to be recurred to; or without the previous application of # of the State legislatures, if the forms of the Constitution are to be pursued. The difficulties in either of these cases must evidently be much greater than will attend the origination of amendments in Congress, which may be done at the instance of a single State Legislature, or even without a single instruction on the subject. 3. If a General Convention were to take place for the avowed and sole purpose of revising the Constitution, it would naturally consider itself as having a greater latitude than the Congress appointed to administer and support as well as to amend the system; it would consequently give greater agitation to the public mind; an election into it would be courted by the most violent partizans on both sides; it wd probably consist of the most heterogeneous characters; would be the very focus of that flame which has already too much heated men of all parties; would no doubt contain individuals of insidious views, who under the mask of seeking alterations popular in some parts but inadmissible in other parts of the Union might have a dangerous opportunity of sapping the very foundations of the fabric. Under all these circumstances it seems scarcely to be presumable that the deliberations of the body could be conducted in harmony, or terminate in the general good. Having witnessed the difficulties and dangers experienced by the first Convention,

which assembled under every propitious circumstance, I should tremble for the result of a Second, meeting in the present temper of America and under all the disadvantages

Library of Congress

I have mentioned. 4. It is not unworthy of consideration that the prospect of a second Convention would be viewed by all Europe as a dark and threatening Cloud hanging over the Constitution just established, and, perhaps over the Union itself; and wd therefore suspend at least the advantages this great event has promised us on that side. It is a well-known fact that this event has filled that quarter of the Globe with equal wonder and veneration, that its influence is already secretly but powerfully working in favor of liberty in France, and it is fairly to be inferred that the final event there may be materially affected by the prospect of things here. We are not sufficiently sensible of the importance of the example which this Country may give to the world, nor sufficiently attentive to the advantages we may reap from the late reform, if we avoid bringing it into danger. The last loan in Holland and that alone, saved the U. S. from Bankruptcy in Europe; and that loan was obtained from a belief that the Constitution then depending wd be certainly speedily, quietly, and finally established, & by that means put America into a permanent capacity to discharge with honor & punctuality all her engagements.